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ACLU Gets Look at Files to Chronicle Tactics of Anti-Integration Unit

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JACKSON, Miss.—For the first time, files of the Sovereignty Commission, which the Mississippi legislature created to work for continued racial separation two years after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that public schools must be integrated, were opened Friday.

They detail tactics used against what the commission termed "subversive, militant or revolutionary groups" in the civil rights movement.

Working under a gag order, lawyers for the American Civil Liberties Union began to examine the contents of seven legal cabinets held shut with steel bands and some boxes stored in a vault in Mississippi's Department of Archives.

The public will learn of the contents only when the ACLU goes to trial in a suit against the state for allegedly spying on citizens during the civil rights movement, and no date has been set.

In the meantime, the state is rife with rumor.

"It's not only whites who may be embarrassed by those files but blacks who were spying on each other, cooperating with the white folks or whatever. They don't want those files opened, either," said Fred L. Banks Jr., a black state representative.

"Its been only 20 years," he added. "Some people involved with [the commission] may have died, but a lot of people here today were around 20 years ago to make requests for information or give information to the Sovereignty Commission.... There are a lot of skeletons in that closet."

Gov. William A. Allain, while Mississippi attorney general, asked the U.S. District Court to keep the files closed because they were "potentially inflammatory" and the state "has a justifiable and compelling interest in allowing old wounds to heal."

The court responded that it did not have the power to "forgive and forget."

The plaintiffs in the ACLU case have seen a few of the documents that included their names and the names of government officials. Rims Barber, a plaintiff and program director here for the Children's Defense Fund, characterized what he had seen of that material as "rubbish, garbage in my opinion." Barber said he was concerned that the files already might have been censored.

The Sovereignty Commission's mandate from 1956 to 1973, when its funds were cut off, was to "do and perform any and all acts and things deemed necessary and proper to protect the sovereignty of the state" from federal rulings, particularly the federal civil rights laws breaking down segregation.

"I am sure that you will not fail to enact appropriate state sovereignty bill which will enable us during the next two years to maintain a successful fight for preserving separation of the races in this state," Gov. J.P. Coleman told the legislature before the vote to form the 12-member commission. The commission had subpoena power, the authority to examine witnesses and to prosecute them for perjury.

In its most active phase, from 1960 to 1964 under Gov. Ross R. Barnett, the commission was especially close to the segregationist White Citizens' Council. In that four-year period, \$200,000 went from the Sovereignty Commission to the White Citizens' Council, according to state auditor's records.

During debate over whether to open the commission's files, state Rep. A.C. (Butch) Lampert likened the commission to the Central Intelligence Agency, but said that "the CIA is a kindergarten by comparison."

The Jackson Clarion-Ledger reviewed the commission's spending records, as submitted to the auditor's office. The panel paid for

speakers to go to Washington and other cities to defend segregation, and established a network of both blacks and whites who informed on civil rights activists. The suspicion and fear created were intended to undercut the civil rights movement.

The commission hired three detective agencies for surveillance of civil rights activists; paid informers to infiltrate the meetings of the Southern Students Organizing Committee; paid a reporter who wrote an article describing the commission as "preventive medicine" for Mississippi, and made payments to two black newspaper editors.

One of them wrote in 1957: "The masses of Negroes in the South are

beginning to see that they are being led over a precipice by the siren calls of the new Negro leadership. The greatest need for the Negro in Jackson, in Mississippi and the rest of the South is more 'Uncle Toms.'"

According to the audit records, the commission also paid for printing 1,015,000 post cards sent to President John F. Kennedy to protest the enrollment of James Meredith at the University of Mississippi in October 1962; it financed "responsible Negro groups" to get blacks to sign petitions opposing the Civil Rights Act of 1964; and it gathered information on the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in a successful effort to prevent the party from being seated at the 1964 Democratic National Convention.

In a 1968 report the commission described its activities:

"We have accumulated voluminous files on the identities, movements and backgrounds of subversive individuals and organizations who have attempted to create turmoil in the state. We have information in our files on approximately 250 organizations. In addition, we have 10,000 names. Many of these work for or represent subversive, militant or revolutionary groups."

The commission's work halted in 1973 when Gov. William L. Waller refused to approve a budget for it. The legislature abolished the panel in 1977 when the ACLU began its case.